Muncaster Castle

A notable family . . .

Muncaster Castle is the home of Sir William and Lady Pennington-Ramsden, one of the oldest of North Country families. The lands were granted to Alan de Penitone in 1208, and about fifty years later a castle was built here by Gamel de Mulcastre. This was considerably enlarged in 1325 when a pele tower was erected – part of its fabric is incorporated into the south-west tower of the present building.

The Penningtons have always had close connections with the Percy family, and in 1459 Sir John Pennington accompanied Henry Percy, seventh Earl of Northumberland, in expeditions against the Scots. Five years later, during the Wars of the Roses, he gave shelter to King Henry VI after the Battle of Towton. A local shepherd found the king wandering alone on the fells and guided him to Muncaster. A picturesque tower, built in the eighteenth century and known as Chapels, marks the spot where the fugitive monarch was found. In gratitude 'Holy King Harry' presented Sir John with the famous 'Luck of Muncaster', a fragile glass dish, which so long as it remains intact ensures the succession of the Pennington family at Muncaster Castle.

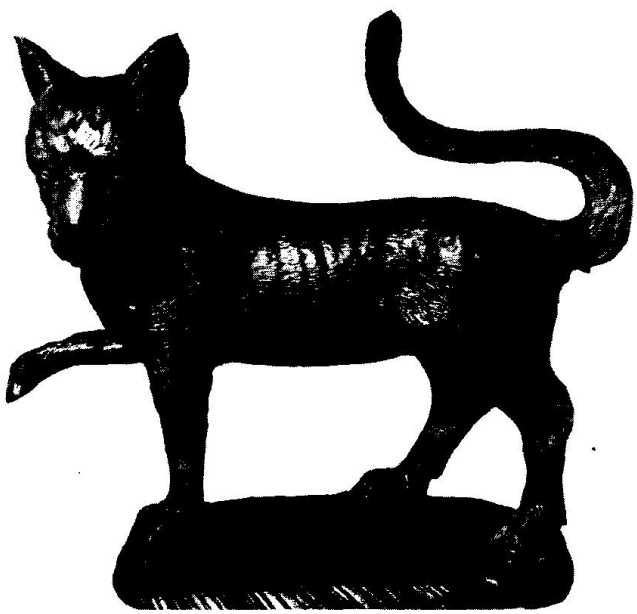
In fact the king's gift seems to have blessed the Penningtons with fame and fortune ever since. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the ability to marry well and support the right side politically saw Sir John Pennington, fifth baronet, created the first Baron Muncaster in the Irish peerage. He was a friend of Pitt and Wilberforce and enjoyed a long parliamentary career. In his time the castle was rebuilt and the grounds landscaped – much of the present library dates from this time. His younger brother succeeded to the title in 1813. He had been something of a firebrand in his youth, and while serving in America killed a man in a duel called for 'a foolish quarrel about humming a tune'.

The fourth Lord Muncaster, Gamel Augustus Pennington (1831–62), married the daughter of the Marquess of Westminster and, just before his death, engaged Anthony Salvin to rebuild Muncaster Castle incorporating parts of the medieval stronghold into the structure. Salvin was an accomplished restorer of castles in the mock-medieval style popular in his day (Scotney Castle in Kent was also restored by him) and at Muncaster he succeeded in preserving a medieval flavour without losing any of the romance that the wonderful situation merits.

The title became defunct with the death of the fifth Baron in 1917, and the Muncaster estate reverted to his mother's family, the Ramsdens, who were long-established and famous in Yorkshire. Thus Sir William, the present (seventh) baronet, remembers the ancient lineage of the Penningtons by linking the name with that of Ramsden.

Above left: *The Luck of Muncaster – an enamelled glass bowl of the fifteenth century.* **Below:** *King Henry VI with the Luck – the painting is in the King's Bedroom.*

Muncaster Castle A guide to its treasures and history



Muncaster Castle guards the entrance to Eskdale and overlooks the ancient anchorage of Ravenglass at its mouth, which was the busiest harbour on the north-west coast in Roman times. A Roman outpost, probably sited on the spot where the castle now stands, was built to watch these approaches, being linked to the garrison at Hardknott higher up Eskdale. This was on the far western flank of the Roman defensive system across northern England based on Hadrian's Wall and the strongholds of Carlisle and Lancaster. The rough track through the mountains to the east via the passes of Wrynose and Hardknott formed a strategic alternative to the longer northern route through Carlisle, and it has been suggested that this, with the harbour of Ravenglass, was to be the springboard for the invasion of Ireland by the Romans. Certainly coins of the time of Emperor Theodosius *c.* AD 380 have been found during excavations at Muncaster.

The name Muncaster is said to derive from the Old Norse word *muli* coupled with *ceaster*, meaning 'the Roman fort on the crag'. It is a wonderful situation; the great vistas to the north and east, and out to sea, led the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, to remark that to his much-travelled eyes Muncaster enjoyed the most perfect views in Europe. Few who come here would argue against these royal sentiments, which echoed those of an earlier visitor, Ruskin, when he wrote of the castle as 'the gateway to Paradise'.

Muncaster is built of pink granite, a colour that harmonises with the heather-clad hills as well as with the abundant rhododendrons surrounding it (there is hardly a time in the year when a rhododendron cannot be found in flower). The exterior is certainly imposing yet, unlike other Victorian reconstructions, it can never be thought of as stern or sinister. Perhaps the financial restrictions imposed on Salvin by trustees after the death of his patron caused him to restrain his natural flamboyance and settle for the plainer details that we can accept today. The ground falls away steeply from the East Front where the central clock-tower hints at the architect's usual exuberance. The entrance is on the South Front of the building, which also has a massive arch designed to allow light to the windows of the octagonal library. The Drawing Room on the West Front was still unroofed when young Lord Muncaster died, and this face of the building was completed in the more economical style enforced by the estate's trustees; most people would say to the benefit of the building as a whole. As you look at this aspect of the castle *(shown on the front cover)* the fourteenth-century pele tower is on the right. Its walls are eight feet thick so that the actual area of its rooms is quite small.

Sir William Pennington-Ramsden, the owner of Muncaster Castle, would like to emphasise that since the collection at Muncaster is always changing, items shown or mentioned in this Guidebook are not necessarily on display.

Picture on this page: *A wooden carving of a wild cat, emblem of the Penningtons, to be found in the porch.*

The Grounds

The present owner's father, the sixth baronet Sir John Ramsden, is largely responsible for the magnificent collection of rhododendrons and azaleas to be seen in the grounds of Muncaster. When Sir John inherited the estate in 1917 he found many species of rhododendron well established, but he already had a very large rhododendron garden at Bulstrode in Gerrards Cross and from here he brought a number of good rhododendron seedlings to Muncaster. After the war Sir John, helped by Mr John Millais, began to establish the Muncaster gardens, which he constantly improved from 1920 to 1958. He was particularly concerned with crossing rhododendrons to produce new hybrids, which he planted out in the woods at Muncaster. He intended to keep the best of the hybrids and destroy the rest, but was prevented from doing so by the outbreak of the 1939 war. Sir John Ramsden also went to great lengths to enlarge the collection (even sponsoring expeditions to the Himalayas) so that now there are flowers in bloom at all times of the year. The humid summers and mild winters of this part of the country are specially favourable to these shrubs, being so similar to their original Himalayan habitat.

From the Terrace Walk there are spectacular views to Black Combe on the edge of the sea on one hand, and up Eskdale to Scafell and Scafell Pike on the other. The ghyll at the front of the castle is ablaze with

A typical display of rhododendrons in bloom; the keynote to the gardens here is the perfect blend of accident with design, the latter largely due to the efforts of the present owner's father.

Left: *the tower at Chapels, marking the spot where King Henry VI was found by a shepherd and brought to shelter at Muncaster.*
Right: *the view from the terrace.*

flowering plants and shrubs in spring and early summer which mellow to the russet tones of autumn as the year progresses. 'Nature Walks' through the most interesting parts of the grounds are well-signposted and are sure to please the more energetic. They may be fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of one of the wild heron that live at Muncaster, for a lonely part of the estate contains the fourth largest heronry to be found in England.

The Gardens themselves are certainly a fitting setting for the many species of birds that are housed here. Three species of South American macaws fly freely, and flamingoes, rheas, toucans, and many other interesting rare birds can be found here. There is also a wallaby enclosure and some Himalayan bears. The Garden Centre specialises in the sale of rhododendrons and azaleas and other plants. A sundries shop sells garden equipment and furniture.

Left: *the Burgundian figure of a soldier in armour, carved from limewood.*
Right: *the beautiful alabaster figurine.*
Opposite page, top: *the Hall;* **bottom:** *one of a pair of horse studies painted for Lowther Augustus, the third Lord Muncaster by John Ferneley.*

The Hall

The Hall provides a perfect introduction to the rest of the collection with its wealth of treasures. This was the Great Hall of the medieval stronghold, the rest of the accommodation comprising of a kitchen (on the site of the Library), a servants' hall, and the pele tower which was primarily a defensive refuge. In 1780 this became the Dining Room and there was a small entrance hall between the tower and the newly built library.

The two beautiful studies of horses on the right-hand wall are the work of John Ferneley for the third Lord Muncaster (1802–38) who appears in one of them on horseback. Over the door to the Library is a rare portrait of King Henry VI which is certainly older than the picture of 'Holy Harry' that hangs in the King's Bedroom. On the left is an unusual limewood carving of a Burgundian soldier in armour; it stands on a court cupboard of the seventeenth century. The sensual alabaster figure on the table by the window (and made translucent by its light) is Flemish work of the early fifteenth century. Two beautiful wood-carvings of The Circumcision and The Birth of the Virgin are also Flemish of the same time. The latter came from Costessey Hall, near Norwich and is carved from one piece of wood. To the left of the window is a picture of the family of the fourth baronet, Sir Joseph Pennington. Two of the sons' heads have been painted after the completion of the rest of the portrait and are glued on.

The Dining Room

The most eye-catching feature of this room must be the magnificent display of silver on the table, the work of the London silversmith Paúl Storr (1792–1834), the most accomplished craftsman of his day in this country. The oak refectory table dates from the mid-seventeenth century, and around it are arranged twelve walnut chairs from the time of Charles II; the companion-pieces to these chairs are the two settees in the Hall. The walls are hung with leather embossed with gold leaf – an unusual feature and unique to this room at Muncaster. The massive equestrian portrait by the window is of Sir John Ramsden, the first baronet (1648–83) though this was painted by Lefevre before he was given the baronetcy. Debrett says that Sir John received this for his 'essential services and the distinguished

zeal exhibited by him at the Revolution' (that deposed James II and brought William of Orange to the throne).

Apart from this dominating portrait there are several other outstanding pictures to enjoy in the Dining Room. High on the wall opposite the fireplace is the delightful study of a *Boy with a Falcon* by Velazquez, arguably the finest work of the Spanish master to be seen in a private collection in this country. To the right of the fireplace is the portrait of Nelson painted by Hoppner; reproductions of this painting are to be seen in many a naval wardroom. The artist is rumoured to have been the illegitimate son of George II. On the other side of the fireplace is an equally famous picture: this is a portrait of Charles II by Van Dyck.

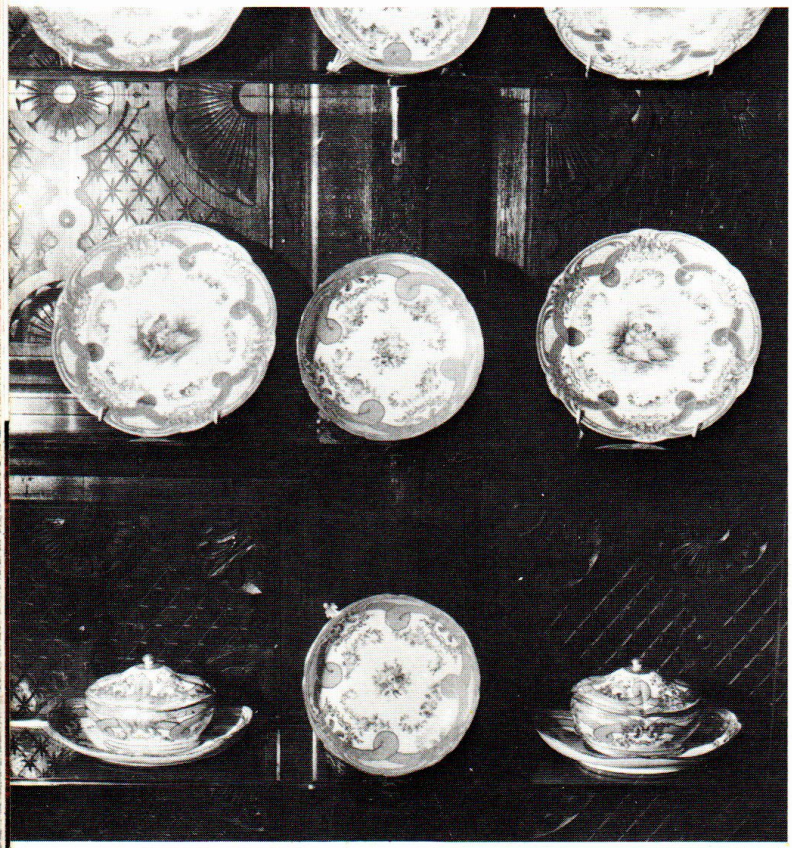
On the sideboard on the opposite side of the room are two precious heirlooms that have interesting local connections. They are seventeenth-century silver-mounted gourds (more usually the mounts contained coconuts) inscribed with the date of their origin (1648) and lines accounting for their arrival at Muncaster:

By Neptune I was cast on Drigg's dry shore
As was the silver sett me thus before
Both by the lord o' the mannour seized as wreck
I on a rock that in a doublet neck.

This is supposed to mean that the silver came from the braid and buttons of an unfortunate man who was washed up on the shore below the castle.

As you leave the room notice the beautiful Worcester, Derby and Sèvres vases in the cabinets on either side of the door.

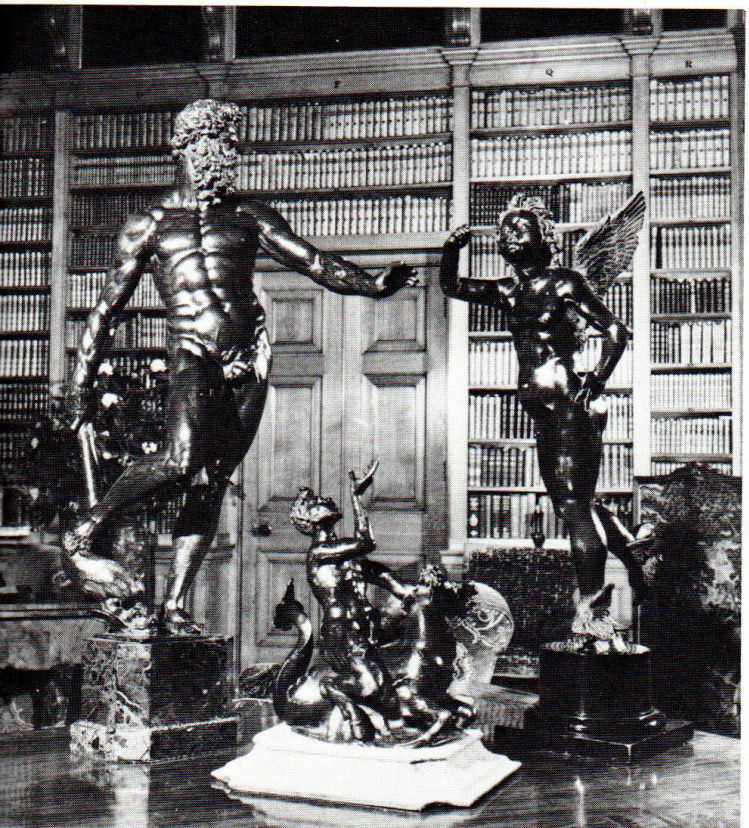
Opposite: *the Dining Room.* **Top of page:** *the study of a* Boy with a Falcon *by Velazquez (1599–1660).* **Above:** *cups made from gourds mounted in silver found after a shipwreck.*



Above: *the Sèvres dinner service.* **Below:** *a Burgomeister chair.*
Opposite page, top: *the galleried library;* **left:** *bronze figurines;* **right:** *occasional table.*

The Library

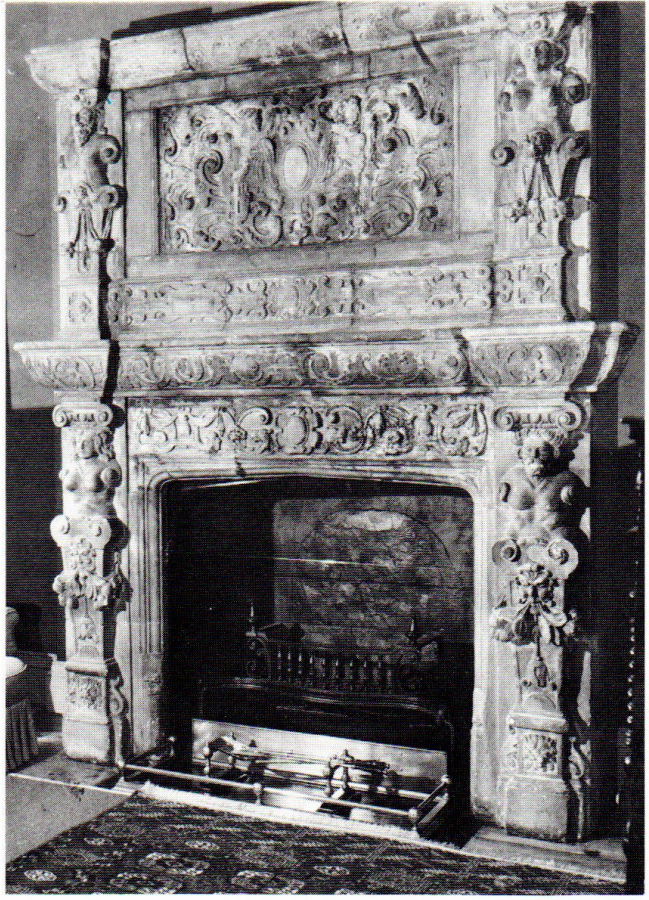
The octagonal library is one of the most acclaimed rooms of the castle, with its beautiful brass railing along the edge of the gallery and its elegant coved ceiling. It dates from 1780, though alterations were made in 1862 by Salvin in the course of his restoration for the fourth Baron Muncaster (he also altered its external appearance so that no hint of its octagonal shape can be seen from outside). The Library stands on the site of the medieval kitchens and contains about 6,000 volumes. The Elizabethan banqueting-table by the windows has a top of later date; on it stands a rare collection of miniature furniture, made as test-pieces or samples by apprentices during the reign of Charles II. The bronze figure of a satyr also on the table is by Benvenuto Cellini, the great sculptor of the Renaissance, while the other pieces are from the School of Bologna. On the walls beyond the table are two pictures by Sir Alfred Munnings; on the right is Sir John Ramsden, fifth baronet, and on the left is Sir William Pennington-Ramsden (the present occupant of Muncaster) at the age of eleven. The beautiful chairs by the windows are of the William and Mary period, and the long-case clock (decorated in Chinese style) has a movement made by Joseph Antram, clockmaker to George I, and tells the date as well as the time. The case is of later date. The rug at the centre of the room is the work of the weavers of Hamadan in Persia. The large, circular six-legged chairs with cane seats are Burgomeister chairs and were used by magistrates in Dutch towns in the seventeenth century. Near the door are two fine walnut tables (English, William and Mary period). One is a card-table with a folding top, and the other is an occasional table with an unusual double gateleg. An interesting box with top and side panels of Capodimonte china (from clay found near Naples) stands on the latter table. The statuettes on either side of the fireplace are of Sheridan and Robespierre. In the gallery the portraits are mainly of the Pennington family and include notable works by the great seventeenth-century Dutch artist, Sir Peter Lely. In a cabinet just outside the door is a beautiful blue and gold Sèvres dinner service.



The Bedrooms

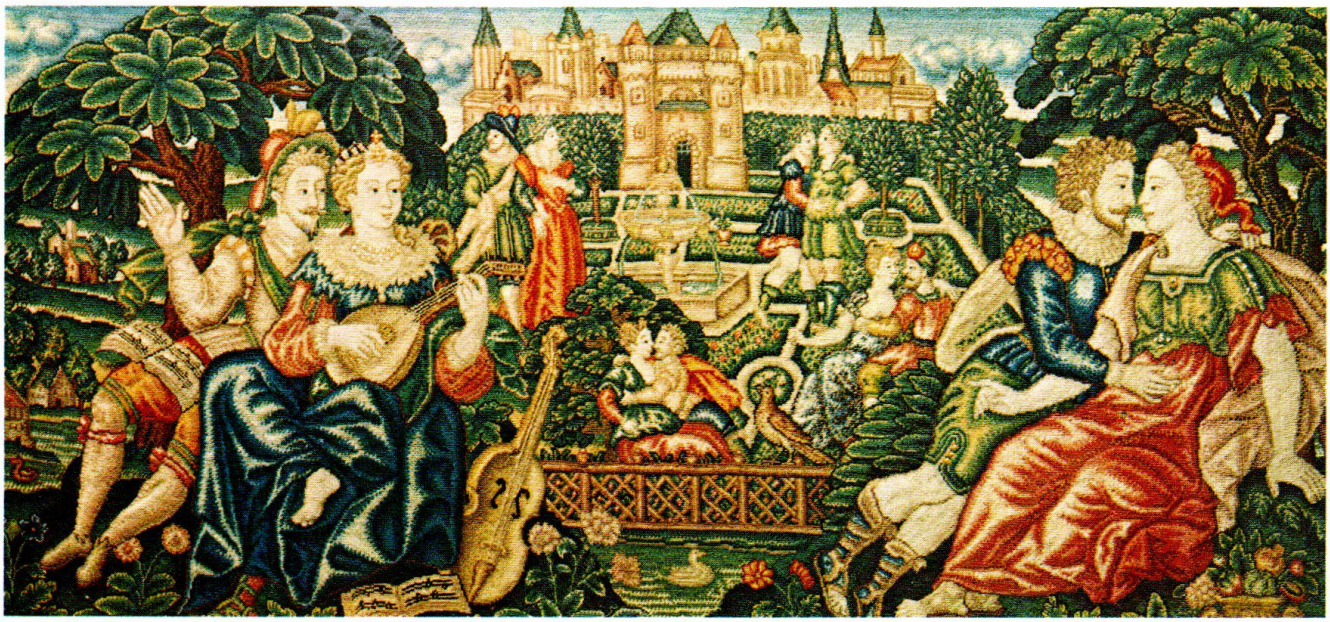
We first visit the West Bedroom, chiefly noted for its magnificent Elizabethan four-poster bed and the bedroom furniture of a slightly later period. The carved scenic panels of the bed are extravagantly inlaid with bog oak and holly. The fireplace is also Tudor and comes from a Yorkshire property. The delightful tapestries are Flemish work of the sixteenth century and feature country scenes with birds and animals. The silk curtains are hand-painted. Naturally there are more fine wall-hangings in the Tapestry Room, with another beautifully carved stone fireplace. The tapestry we illustrate in colour is to be found just outside this room, on the stairs. It is an Elizabethan allegory, showing, among other things, the Seven Deadly Sins.

At the end of the passageway is the famous portrait of Thomas Skelton, the 'late Fool of



Opposite page, top: *the Tudor fireplace in the West Bedroom that came from Yorkshire.* **Lower picture on opposite page:** *the richly carved Elizabethan bed, also in the West Bedroom. Note too the English chest on the left of the picture, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, ivory, bone and multi-coloured woods. It dates from the time of the Restoration.* **Left:** *another chest in the West Bedroom; it has ivory embellishments and is Dutch work of the sixteenth century.*

Right: *one of the beautiful Flemish tapestries to be found at Muncaster. This one dates from the sixteenth century and shows a landscape with dogs fighting and a fox carrying a hare.*



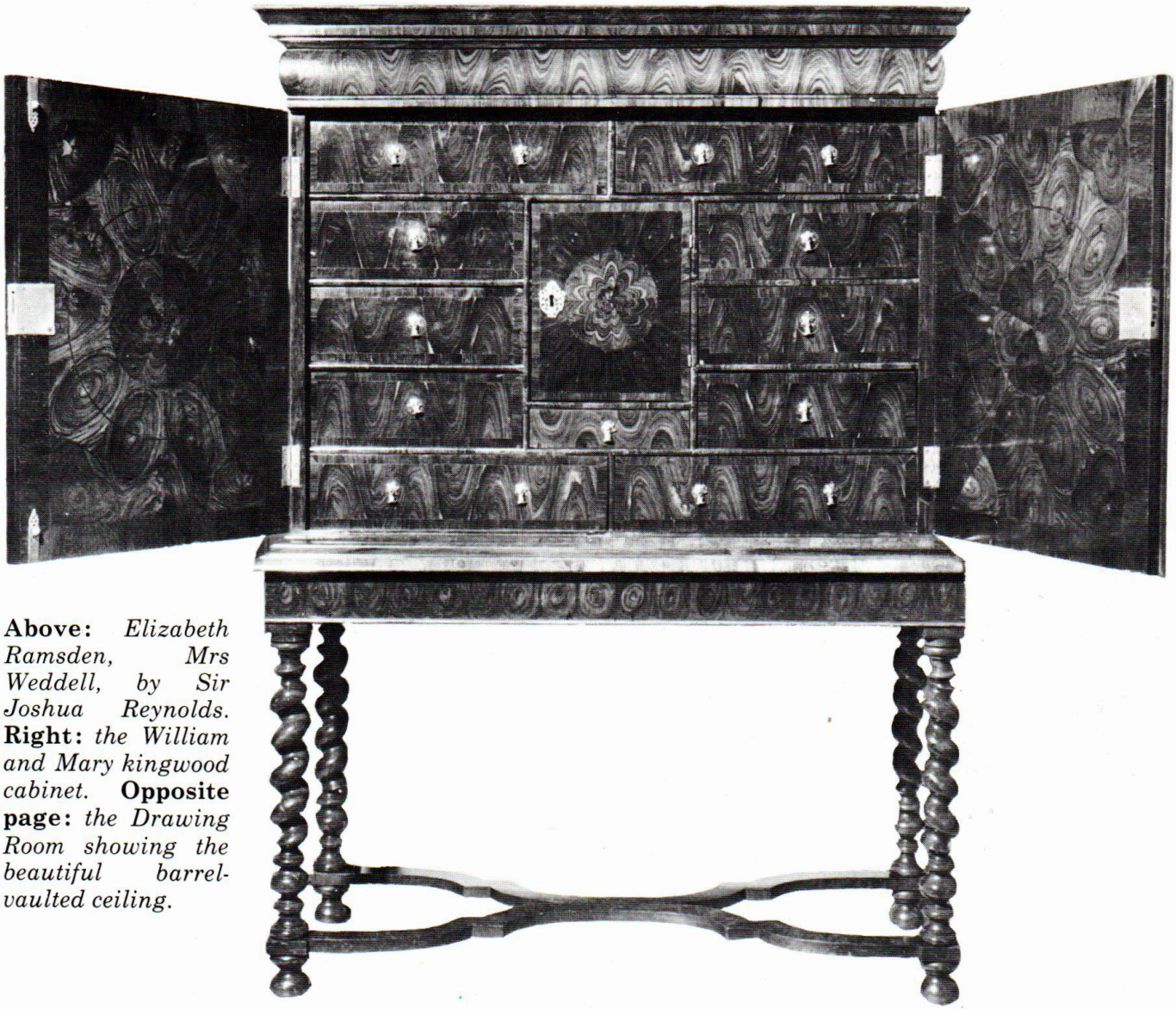
Muncaster' who died in the seventeenth century. His Last Will and Testament is painted on the left-hand side of the portrait. Skelton gave the word 'tomfoolery' to the language, though he is reputed to have been an evil man who still haunts the castle. A copy of this portrait is at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon.

The King's Bedroom makes us remember the story of the Luck of Muncaster (a picture of the king with the Luck, in an ornate Charles II frame, hangs here), and from the window the eighteenth-century tower at Chapels can be seen.

Opposite page, top: *part of one of a set of three panels of Elizabethan tapestry depicting Biblical stories, hanging on the wall of the stairs.* **Opposite page, bottom:** *the Tapestry Room, showing another ornate Tudor fireplace with a fireback dated 1589 commemorating the victory over the Spanish Armada.* **This page, top:** *the King's Bedroom, with original sixteenth-century panelling and carving.* **Left:** *Thomas Skelton, the last Fool (jester) of Muncaster, holding his Last Will and Testament.* **Right:** *a beautiful chair, of the time of Charles II, in the King's Bedroom.*

Drawing Room

This room was built on the site of a courtyard in 1861 and work on it had hardly begun when the young Lord Muncaster died. Consequently its decoration was less lavish than might have been intended, though today the room appears unimpaired by any restraints. The beautiful barrel-vaulted ceiling is decorated with plasterwork by Italian craftsmen. In the centre of the room is an eighteenth-century Italian table with intricate carvings of Venetian lions on its six legs. The stools by this table are adapted from chairs that originated from Warter Priory in Yorkshire. On the table stand pieces of Derby china of the Bloor period (1811–48), and a copy of an Irish potato ring in silver gilt presented to Lord Muncaster by his tenants. The beautiful marble fireplace is said to have been designed by Robert Adam and came from Byram, the Yorkshire



Above: *Elizabeth Ramsden, Mrs Weddell, by Sir Joshua Reynolds.* **Right:** *the William and Mary kingwood cabinet.* **Opposite page:** *the Drawing Room showing the beautiful barrel-vaulted ceiling.*

home of the Ramsdens. To the right of the fireplace is a veneered William and Mary cabinet, one of the finest pieces at Muncaster. The small table in the window is of the same period, and on it stands Meissen china and the insignia of the Order of the Star of Ethiopia, presented to Sir William by the late emperor, Hailé Selassié. At the far end of the room are Jacobean chairs with original needlework seats and backs.

The portraits in this room form one of the most valuable collections of family portraits in the country. They are mainly of the Ramsden family, though many would think that the finest portrait here is that of the Protector, Edward Seymour, First Duke of Somerset (1500–52), by de Heere. It hangs over the sideboard at the far end of the room. He was the father of the unfortunate Jane Seymour and ruled for her infant son, Edward VI, on the death of Henry VIII. Somerset did more than anyone to bring about the Protestant revolution in England. However, though his rule was good and just, he was deposed and met his death on the block at Tower Hill. The fifth baronet married a daughter of the Duke of Somerset hence this painting's presence here. This great pageant of English portrait painting (embracing all six of the Ramsden baronets and their wives) through the ages includes most of the famous painters popular through the centuries and there are works by Lely, Kneller, Hudson, Gainsborough (the haughty lady to the left of the fireplace), Reynolds, Lawrence, Watts and de Lazlo.

Catherine Thynne, Viscountess Lonsdale

Thomas Lord Coventry, Lord Keeper of Coventry

Henry Viscount Lonsdale

Sir John Ramsden

Charles Seymour, 6th Duke of Somerset

Frances Ramsden, Duchess of Bolton

John Lowther, M.P.

Charles Butler, 2nd Duke of Bolton

Edward Seymour, 1st Duke of Somerset

John Lord Frecheville

John Ramsden Esq.

Sarah Butler, Lady Ramsden, w. of Sir John

Anne Charlotte de Vick, Baroness Frecheville

Sir John Ramsden, 1st Bt

Elizabeth Lowther, Lady Ramsden

Margaret Norton, Lady Ramsden

Sir John Ramsden, 3rd Bt

Sir William Ramsden, 2nd Bt

Capt. George Ramsden

Margaret Norton, Lady Ramsden

May Liddell Bright, Marchioness of Rockingham

Hon. Louisa Susannah Ingram-Shepherd, Lady Ramsden

Sir John Ramsden, 4th Bt

Isabella Shepherd, Marchioness of Hertford

John Charles Ramsden, M.P.

William Weddell, M.P.

Hon. Isabella Dundas, w. of John Charles Ramsden

Lady William

Sir John William

Lady Helen Gwen-

John Lowther,

Hon. Isabella Dundas, w. of John

Joan Buxton, w. of the 6th Bt

Sir John Frecheville

Veronica Morley, w. of the 7th Bt

Sir William Pennington-Ramsden

GENEALOGY OF PENNINGTON-RAMSDEN FAMILY

Sir John de Penyngton (received 'Luck of Muncaster' from King Henry VI). b. 1393. d. 1470 = Elizabeth, d. of Sir Nichols de Radcliffe de Derwentwater

John Pennington Esq. = Isabel, d. of John Broughton

Sir John Pennington (led his soldiers at Flodden). d. 1518 = Jane, widow of Sir Robert Ogle

Sir William Pennington (knighted at Battle of Valenciennes). d. 1533 = Francis Pagrane (kinswoman to Charles, Duke of Suffolk)

William Pennington Esq. *c.* 1573 = 1. Joan, d. of Thomas Lord Wharton. 2. Dame Bridget Askew, d. of Sir John Huddlestone

Joseph Pennington Esq. (granted Church of Muncaster by King James). d. 1641 = Isabel Savill

Sir John Pennington d. 1646 cr. Lord High Admiral 1642

William Pennington Esq. d. 1652 = Katherine Sherbourne

Joseph Pennington Esq. b. 1615. d. 1658 = Margaret, d. of John Fleetwood of Penwortham

Sir William Pennington, 1st Bt (baronetcy cr. 1676). b. 1655. d. 1730 = Isabel, d. and sole heir of John Stapleton of Warter

Sir Joseph Pennington, Bt. d. 1743 = Hon. Margaret Lowther. Sister to John, 1st. Viscount Lonsdale (see Sir Wm Ramsden, 2nd Bt who now became brother-in-law to Viscount Lonsdale)

Sir John Pennington, Bt (Lord Lieutenant of Westmorland). d. 1768

Sir Joseph Pennington, Bt. d. 1793 = Sarah, d. of John Moore

John, 1st Baron Muncaster (cr. 1783) d. 1813 = Penelope, d. of James Compton Esq.

Gamel (died in infancy)

General Lowther Pennington, 2nd Baron Muncaster by Remainder to the title from his brother. d. 1818 = Esther, d. of Thomas Barry Esq.

Lowther Augustus John, 3rd Baron Muncaster. b. 1802. d. 1838 = Francis Catharine, youngest daughter of Sir John Ramsden, Bt. of Byram

Gamel Augustus, 4th Baron Muncaster b. 1831. d. 1862 = Joan Grosvenor, d. of Richard, 2nd Marquis of Westminster

Joslyn Francis, 5th and last Baron Muncaster. b. 1834. d. 1917 = Constance L'Estrange

Muncaster Estate now reverted to the Ramsden family

GENEALOGY OF RAMSDEN FAMILY

Robert Ramsden Esq. =

John Ramsden of Longley Hall (arms were granted in 1575) =

William Ramsden Esq. = Rosamund, d. of Thomas Pilkington

Sir John Ramsden = Margaret, d. of Baron Frecheville (1624)

William Ramsden = Elizabeth, d. of George Palmes of Lindley (1648)

Sir John Ramsden, 1st Bt. b. 1648. d. 1683 = Sarah, d. of Charles Butler of Coates (1670)

Sir William Ramsden, 2nd Bt = Elizbeth, d. of John, 1st Viscount Lonsdale

Sir John Ramsden, 3rd Bt = Margaret, d. of William Norton of Sawley

Sir John Ramsden, 4th Bt = Louisa Susanna Ingram-Shepherd, d. of Charles Viscount Irvine

Francis (married Lowther Augustus, 3rd Baron Muncaster)

John Ramsden Esq. (no title as died in lifetime of father) = Isabella, d. of Thomas, Lord Dundas

Sir John Ramsden, 5th Bt (inherited grandfather's title) = Helen Gwendolen, d. of Edward, Duke of Somerset

Sir John Frecheville Ramsden, 6th Bt = Joan, d. of Geoffry Fowell Buxton

Sir William Pennington-Ramsden, 7th Bt = Veronica, d. of Frederick William Morley

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